DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 487 HE 031 936

AUTHOR Jackson, Lisa R.
TITLE Examining Both Race and Gender in the Experiences of African American College Women.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Colleges; *Black Students; Colleges; *Educational Experience; *Females; Higher Education; Qualitative Research; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Differences; Sex Differences; *Sexual Identity; Single Sex Colleges; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS African Americans

ABSTRACT

This study examined how African American women defined who they were in their respective college contexts, focusing on the roles of gender, race, and institutional type. A total of 20 women from a white coeducational institution, a predominantly white women's college, and a coeducational, historically black college participated in in-depth interviews. The results revealed that the participants believed that being an African American woman meant struggle, being an African American could be problematic, and being an African American meant being conscious of one's identity. Participants from the historically black college most often referred to the struggle of being an African American woman in the larger society, while participants at the predominantly white schools reflected on the issue of being a woman who is different from what the school environment considers "woman." Participants at the predominantly white schools spent much of their energy fighting race-based stereotypes and demanding to be identified, recognized, and respected for both their race and their gender. (Contains 40 references.) (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 429 487

Examining Both Race and Gender in the Experiences of African American College Women

Lisa R. Jackson, Ph.D.
Boston College

Paper presented at the 1998 American Education Research Association Annual Meeting
April 13-17
San Diego, CA

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HE031136

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lisa R. Jackson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Introduction

My presentation represents the bringing together of two not very distinct experiences. The first experience is my dissertation study for which I interviewed 20 women at 3 different colleges examining their definitions of self and the way they made meaning of the relationship between race and gender. The second experience is a reflexive process I engaged in both during and after my study. In this experience I explored my own role in my dissertation research as a Black middle class woman.

Today I will bring these two experiences together in a way that I hope shares with you both the fascinating findings of my research as well as the complexity of engaging in critical, conscious, and reflexive research. My presentation is divided into 3 parts (more divisiveness I know). In the first part you will hear from me, the researcher, about the study - it's framework, method, and questions. In the second part you will hear from the women who so graciously offered their words. Lastly, you will hear from me, the Black middle class woman who is sometimes the researcher and other times the researched. To help you (and me) keep track of all of this I will use three cues. The first are overheads which will alert you to the topic being addressed. The second cue is this pair of glasses which represent the "academic". The third cue is this backpack which represents the "student". I will put these on and off as it is appropriate throughout the presentation.

The Study [Glasses]

There is substantial literature that urges colleges and universities to address the issues of cultural and ethnic diversity on their campuses (Jones, 1990; Schlossberg, 1989; Stage and Manning, 1992). The reason commonly given is the increasing number of students of color on campuses and the changing demographics of the country as a whole

(Gollnick, 1992; Jones, 1990). A more provocative reason is that all students need to feel that they matter on a campus (Schlossberg, 1989). While all students may experience forms of marginality over the course of their time in college, students of color in particular can feel marginalized more often than they feel that they matter. This marginalized experience can negatively affect their academic and social experiences.

The study findings described in this presentation highlight the experiences of African American women on three college/university campuses across the country. As students who are defined both by their race and gender, these women and other women of color provide a unique challenge and opportunity for colleges and universities to address the complex issues of diversity in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

The sociocultural model of the self developed by Oyserman and Markus (1993) argue that the self cannot be studied void of its sociocultural context. They posit that the self is comprised of many self-conceptions. While some self-conceptions are temporary and function only in a given moment, others are more permanent self-conceptions and result from repeated experiences.

To utilize this framework, it is necessary to draw upon other work to identify the sociocultural contexts specific to African American college women. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) argues that Black women experience overlapping social and political oppressions based on a variety of sociocultural factors (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation). To focus on any one of these factors alone would be to minimize the role of the others creating a false representation of African American women's experiences. To label this multi-factored experience, Collins refers to the identity of African American women as a

"both/and" construct (e.g., both African American and women). As a tool for interpreting the experiences of African American women, Collins (1991) developed a framework she calls Black feminist thought. She presents five dimensions that characterize Black feminist thought: (1) core themes of a Black woman's standpoint, (2) variation of responses to core themes, (3) the interdependence of experience and consciousness, (4) consciousness and the struggle for a self-defined standpoint, and (5) the interdependence of thought and action. For today I will focus on the first and second dimensions.

The first dimension is concerned with core themes that exist for African American women as the result of a common history and similar experiences. The second dimension Collins describes as "variation of responses to core themes". While as a marginalized group African American women have shared the experiences of racism and sexism, activism, struggle, and stereotypes, each individual woman will have a unique response to these experiences depending on the environment she is in and her unique life circumstances.

Method

While this study used a mixed-method design, today I will be sharing only the qualitative data (see Jackson, 1996 for more). Essentially I wanted to find out how African American women defined who they were in their respective college contexts. How did they make sense of gender and race within their definitions of self? What role did the type of school they attend play in such meaning-making? I interviewed 20 women from three schools each for 1-2 hours. Wesson is a predominately white coeducational university. Berton is a predominately white women's college. Johnson is a coeducational HBCU. All three schools are private.

The Women [Backpack]

Being an African American woman means struggle.

It's another item, it's like another item on the reasons the world should oppress Dianne list, or try to oppress. Um, basically that just means that I've got to be aware of that and not fall victim to it. And if that means that I have to work a little harder, then I'm just going to have to work a little harder.

It's like you don't have license to cry. Because, I mean what the hell you complaining about? People have went through worse. Would you please!

But, on the other side, the one side, the Black side, being Black is such a hard struggle, but in the end the results are rainbowy and colorful. Because you've worked so hard and now to look back it's like I'm over that. I'm on that mountain top, it's over.

Being an African American woman can be problematic.

I would think that, being a woman has recently meant that, for me it's kind of, in a big way it's kind of been disconcerting because I start to realize like the kind of society I'm in and the kind of world that I am and I start to realize, you know, I mean, it really bites for women. I mean, everything is just like over here with the male dominated power structures and it's like, ok how easy access am I going to have to that? So, realize that there's a glass ceiling. You're only going to get this far.

...when you're Black going out there everyone's thinking, especially as professional, oh well they're just going to go and they're going to just forget where they came from and all that. And so you have to deal with the white people looking at you funny anyway, and then you know the Blacks in your community trying to downgrade you.

Being an African American woman means being conscious.

It's, it's really hard, because when you're in a situation, at least I find myself doing this now because I'm much more conscious and aware than when I used to be, and I'm thinking what is she thinking, how is she interpreting this..?

You just don't, if you're conscious it's like the responsibility of the knowing. You know, if you're conscious that you're Black and you understand what's going on you just, either you have struggle to be like the "Invisible Man", and just go hide. And I think that's something that a lot of Black people do struggle with.

I'm Black, I got work to do. I can't just be a student and be content with that and be happy with myself because I know, 'cause I know better. And a lot of times I wish that I just didn't know. That's why I look at those white people on [the] Plaza and I'm like, I wish, I just wish all I had to worry about is class and who's zoomin' who.

Variation of Responses to Core Themes - it depends on where you go to school[Glasses]

The second dimension of Black feminist thought recognizes the diversity of responses by African American women to core themes. In this instance there are variations by school. Attending an HBCU rather than a PWCU seems to have an influence on how women talk about who they are as African American women. Women at Johnson most often refer to the struggle in being African American women in the larger society. While they are in an all African American environment, they do recognize that outside of Johnson they will have to deal with racial discrimination and racism. However, currently Johnson offers a safe place to be Black. Most of the women chose Johnson because it is an HBCU. They expected that it would nurture and support them as African Americans. For most of the Johnson women, the school has met this expectation.

Berton and Wesson women, though they also mentioned struggle, spoke more often about their consciousness as African American women as it is informed by struggle. Sometimes the struggle was with white students and negative conceptions of African Americans. Other times the struggle was more personal. How do I not lose who I am as an African American and also be successful in the larger society? Being at PWCUs these women are also confronted with the issue of being a woman who is different from what the school environment considers "woman." [Backpack]

Kelly at Johnson

Well, I always wanted to come to Johnson and my sister wanted to come to Johnson, and you know it's a Black school. It's really it's everything that I thought

it would be. Like about you know about forming your identity and really learning about who you are.

Lori at Berton

And, and then um, people hear that Berton, oh all women, we can always be women here. But the archetype, the prototype for a woman is a white woman. A white straight woman like that. So if you happen to be African American, Latino, or Chinese, and you happen to be bi or questioning or queer, oh my gosh, just forget it.

Cynthia at Wesson

When I was thinking about doing feminist studies I took a few courses in it. But I was really disappointed because I think the feminist movement has really excluded women of color in a lot of respects. And so, and I think, its always been a question of, well you're a woman. But it's like I can't, no I'm a Black woman and that's really a unique experience...

Summary of Qualitative Findings [Glasses]

These excerpts from interviews show clearly how both race and gender are important and related constructs within the self-concept of African American women. The core themes of struggle, problem, and consciousness represent only a snapshot of what being an African American woman means to these participants on these campuses. The racial and gender composition of schools strongly influences the options available for these women to experience both their gender and racial identity. Women at Johnson find strength in who they are as both African Americans and as women. Women at Berton and Wesson spend much of their energy fighting race-based stereotypes and demanding to be

identified, recognized, and respected for both their race and gender. In addition, women at these two schools are faced with proving to white students, faculty, and administrators that they are academically qualified to be on campus. At all three of the campuses African American women struggle to not loose a connection with their racial/ethnic community at the same time they strive for success and recognition in the larger society.

About me/us - The dilemmas of interpretation and re-presentation [Remove Glasses]

I am an African American woman who studies African American women consciously. By doing this I am also conscious that the people I study are in essence "me". I engage in such study because of the lack of my/our experience represented in the research literature. My sameness is made more complex by the fact that I attended three of the four schools represented in my study at some point during my undergraduate or graduate career. So not only am I studying myself/us in a collective sense, with this study I also studied myself/us within specific shared environments (though during different time periods).

During this reflexive process I struggled with the tension involved in having both insider and outsider status. I was especially worried about interpretation and re-presentation issues. How do I interpret stories about "myself"/us? What do I bring with my insider status to that interpretation? In what ways am I also an outsider and how does this influence my interpretation and re-presentation? How does what I bring as an individual African American educated woman join with what the women in my study bring to create a shared meaning of our/their experiences as African American educated women? Can I present both the similarity and diversity within the us called African American women?

Richardson (1995) points out that one problem with reflexivity is the danger of being excessively reflexive to the point of getting lost in meta-analysis. While I would agree that this could be a problem and a researcher could wind up "cogitating their navel", the purpose of the research could be a mitigating factor. As defined by Baca Zinn, I am one of those "minority researchers who seeks to 'set the record straight'". As such, the issues raised for me in my reflexive process focused less on the meaning of meaning, and more on how I was re-presenting the collective of African American women and interpreting the stories that together we wove of our experiences. I was concerned with how this negotiated meaning, that I was ultimately responsible for sharing with the public, would be interpreted by readers.

Foster (1996) warns that it is not uncommon for researchers of color to loose access to the cues that facilitate their movement within their own communities. This can be the result of the mainstreaming and assimilation necessary for pursuing research in academia. The result is a decreased sense of value of the way of thinking and communicating that is very valuable within their "birth communities".

Being reflexive has allowed me to consider this warning and to take it seriously. For some of us in certain contexts, being an African American woman in a visible sense is enough to confirm insider status. In other contexts, being an African American woman in a visible sense does not mean that I am an African American woman in a political sense.

Being reflexive helped me to identify the negotiated meaning created between me and the women in my study. This meaning was created with the help of the larger African American community that has a shared socio-cultural, historical, and political experience in this country. While being an insider provided me with unique opportunities and points

of connection with my participants, looking back reflexively, it also challenged me to be critical of my own assumptions and agenda. Being reflexive in this instance pushed me to own the research that I do which is both personal and political. When I began my dissertation study I was studying my-self. In exploring the ways in which the women in the study and myself were the same and yet different, I have sense come to recognize that I was actually studying our-selves - us. Engaging in reflexive practice provided me the opportunity to recognize that and to remember who my research was for and why I bother to do it at all.

References*

* This reference list includes resources not cited directly in the above paper but that are associated with the topic more generally.

African American Women's College Experiences

Allen, W. R. (1992). The color of success: African American college student outcomes at predominately white and historically black public colleges and universities. Harvard Educational Review, 62(1), 26-44.

Brown, R.D., & Barr, M.J. (1990). Student development: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In L. V. Moore (Ed.), Evolving Theoretical Perspectives on Students (pp.83-91). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Caracelli, V.J., & Greene, J.C. (1993). Data analysis strategies for mixed-method evaluation designs. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 15 (2), 195-207.

Collins, P. H. (1991). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. New York: Routledge.

Dillard, C.B. (1994). The power of call, the necessity of response: African world feminist voices as catalysts for educational change and social empowerment. Initiatives, 56 (3), 9-21).

Fleming, J. (1984). Blacks in college. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Gollnick, D.M. (1992). Understanding the dynamics of race, class, and gender. In M.E. Dilworth (Ed.), Diversity in teacher education: New expectations (pp. 63-78). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Jackson, L. (in press). Expanding the Definition of Diversity: The Influence of Both Race and Gender in the Lives of African American College Women. The Review of Higher Education.

Jackson, L. (1996). Race and gender schema in the self-concept of African American college women. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, California.

James, J., & Farmer, R. (Eds.). (1993). Spirit, space and survival: African American women in (white) academe. New York: Routledge.

Jones, W.T. (1990). Perspectives on ethnicity. In L. V. Moore (Ed.), Evolving Theoretical Perspectives on Students (pp.59-71). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kuhn, M.H., & McPartland, T.S. (1954). An empirical investigation of self-attitudes. American Sociological Review, 19, 68-76.

Kunkel, C.A. (1994). Women's needs on campus: How universities meet them. Initiatives, 56 (2), 15-28.

LeCompte, M.D., & Preissle, J.G. (with Tesch, R.) (1993). Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research (2nd ed.). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Madrazo-Peterson, R., & Rodriguez, M. (1978). Minority students' perceptions of a university environment. Journal of College Student Personnel, 19, 259-263.

Moses, Y.T. (1989). Black women in academe: Issues and strategies. Washington DC: Association of American Colleges.

Oyserman, D., & Markus, H. R. (1993). The sociocultural self. In J. Suls (Ed.), Psychological perspectives on the self: The self in social perspective (Vol. 4,). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pascarella, E., Whitt, E., Nora, A., Edison, M., Hagedorn, L., & Terezini, P. (1996). What have we learned from the first year of the National Study of Student Learning? Journal of Student Development, 37 (2), 182-192.

Phinney, J. S. (1992). The multigroup ethnic identity measure: A new scale for use with diverse groups. Journal of Adolescent Research, 7(2), 156-176.

Schlossberg, N.K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. In D.C. Roberts (Ed.), Designing campus activities to foster a sense of community (pp.5-15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Seidman, I.E. (1991). Interviewing as qualitative research. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Stage, F.K., & Manning, K. (1992). Enhancing the multicultural campus environment: A cultural brokering approach. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Steward, R.J., Gimenez, M.M., & Jackson, J.D. (1995). A study of personal preferences of successful university students as related to race/ethnicity, and sex: Implications and recommendations for training, practice, and future research. Journal of College Student Development, 36 (2), 123-131.

Timm, S., & Armstrong, K. (1995). Valuing human diversity: What is really happening on campuses across the country and at Northern Illinois State? Thresholds in Education, 22 (3-4), 28-34.

Reflexive Research

Baca Zinn, M. (1979) Field research in minority communities: Ethical, methodological and political observations by an insider. Social Problems, 27(2), 209-219).

Edwards, R. (1996). White woman researcher - Black women subjects. Feminism and Psychology, 6(2), 169-175.

Facio, E. (1993) Ethnography as personal experience. In J. Stanfield II & R. Dennis (Eds.), Race and ethnicity in research methods (pp.75-91). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Foster, M. (1996). Like us but not one of us: Reflections on a life history study of African American teachers. In S. Etter-Lewis and M. Foster (Eds.), Unrelated kin: Race and gender in women's personal narratives (pp.215-224). New York: Routledge.

Foster, M. (1994). The power to know one thing is never to know all things: Methodological notes on two studies of Black American teachers. In A. Gitlin (Ed.), Power and method: Political activism and educational research (pp.129-146). New York: Routledge.

Hale, S. (1991). Feminist method, process, and self-criticism: Interviewing Sudanese women. In S.G. Gluck & D. Patai (Eds.), Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history (pp.121-136). New York: Routledge.

Hurd, T. L., & McIntyre, A. (1996). The seduction of sameness: Similarity and representing the other. Feminism & Psychology, 6(1), 86-91.

Kimmel, E.B., & Garko, M.G. (1995). Ethnic diversity in the experience of feminism: An existential-phenomenological approach. In H. Landrine (Ed.), Bringing cultural diversity to feminist psychology: Theory, research, and practice (pp.27-53). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Martin, J.R. (1994). Methodological essentialism, false difference, and other dangerous traps. Signs, 19(31), 630-657.

Merton, R.K. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge. American Journal of Sociology, 78(1), 9-47.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), Doing feminist research (pp. 30-61). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Reay, D. (1996). Dealing with difficult differences: Reflexivity and social class in feminist research. Feminism & Psychology, 6(3), 443-456.

Richardson, M.S. (1995). Rereading Nancy Datan: Reflexivity in practice. Feminism and Psychology, 5(4), 481-486.

Riessman, C. K. (1991). When gender is not enough: Women interviewing women. In J. Lorber, & S. Farrell (Eds.), The social construction of gender (pp. 217-236). Newbury Park: Sage.

Spelman, E. (1988). Inessential woman. Boston: Beacon.

Stanfield, J.H. (1994). (Response) Empowering the culturally diversified sociological voice. In A. Gitlin (Ed.), Power and method: Political activism and educational research (pp. 166-175). New York: Routledge.